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ABSTRACT

Given preschool children's characteristically short attention spans and unpredictable interests, teachers can encourage early reading most effectively and appropriately through the systemization of informal or incidental, rather than formal, learning. They can make learning to read relevant to traditional preschool activities in a number of ways. By posting words around the classroom, as in, for example, activity menus, teachers can elicit parents' help in pointing out important messages; and by labeling grocery items used in dramatic play, they can focus attention on new words. Intermittently modeling reading in a small, enclosed, rather than a large, open reading corner, teachers can, according to recent research, increase the amount of time children independently spend in the area. In the organic reading center--a sociable place complete with typewriter, blank books, index cards, crayons, and paste--teachers can take dictation for the children's own books. During the regularly scheduled large group period, teachers can promote emergent reading through songs, chants, finger play, and stories. (MM)

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A PRESCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR EMERGENT READING

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Environment, in terms of ecological and human factors, should not be overlooked when planning educational techniques because psychologists have demonstrated that it has a marked influence on children's behavior (Barker & Gump, 1964; Gump, 1975; Skinner, 1974). Early reading, also can influence children's behavior. Children who learn to read in the preschool and kindergarten years maintain their headstart in elementary school, providing succeeding curricula are adjusted accordingly, and their performance in other subjects is enhanced (Durkin, 1966; McKee & Brezinski, 1966).

Sometimes early reading emerges without formal training, but yet it seems with considerable adult help, either at home or school (Durkin, 1966; Hiebert, 1981; Mason, 1980). To many, the road to early reading through emergence seems particularly appropriate since very young children (i.e., three- and four-year-olds) by their own nature, are characteristically informal and unpredictable (Durkin,

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1976; Goetz, 1979). They tend not to sit still for a long time (not to deny that they have a collection of varying lengths of attention spans), and they seem more interested in activities that they choose themselves, in which they may come and go at will, in which they do not have to wait, and in which they may be independent. Furthermore, they have limited language, lack pencil-and-paper worksheet and test-taking skills, and understand the concrete better than the abstract, all of which might hinder their progress in formal structured learning situations. It is also felt by some that socialibility and creativity should be emphasized in preschool for possibly these need to be learned early in life to reach their potential, and informality promotes them. Consequently, it appears developmentally appropriate for young children's learning to emerge in situations which take into account the above mentioned characteristics.

This presentation will describe environmental adaptations that might facilitate emergent reading in the typical traditional preschool in a pleasant, pressure-free, informal atmosphere. The resulting overall approach is viewed as developmentally appropriate for preschool children and as a systemization of informal and/or incidental learning.

Definitions of Early Reading and Informality

For clarificatrion of environmental adaptations for emergent reading to be described today, it is necessary to explain what is

meant by early reading and informality in this context. Early reading might better be described as the early stages of reading. It is at this time that a child becomes aware that oral and written language are directly related. What one says can be written down, and what is written down can be said. The child then becomes aware that spoken words are written with letters that are discriminable patterns which provide cues for the sounds emitted in words. This is a holistic awareness of written language. The orchestration of the overall reading process involves learning as well as using many skills simultaneously. Lower order and higher order skills interact with each other and can be learned concurrently (Lovett, 1981). Furthermore, the difficulty of each skill depends on the context and other supports (e.g. teacher interaction) which means there is not a progressive order of reading skills from easy to difficult to be learned. Thus, early reading is learned and should be taught within the meaningful context of language.

Now, what does the term informality mean in this circumstance? Learning to read in an informal way means no standards preprimers, common basals, workbooks, flash card exercises, required oral reading or a required daily reading period. Rather, it means learning to read in the context of language relevant to traditional preschool activities which allow for much physical movement, sociability and creative use of materials.

Environmental Adaptations for Emergent Reading

With the definitions of early reading and informality in mind, a brief description of environmental adaptations in the preschool to promote emergent reading will be offered. As mentioned previously, the environment will include activities offered, physical arrangement of the classroom and teacher behavior.

Words Posted

Several options are available for posting words in the classroom for children to learn to read incidentally. One way is an activity menu at the preschool entrance listing the fare for the day such as blocks, painting and grocery store. On arrival, parents may be encouraged to read the menu with their children and discuss which activity might be tried first. In the room each activity may have an identical label, as that at the entranceway, for the children and teacher to read together. In this way the children can have practice reading the same words, but each time it will be meaningful not mere rote practice. A pilot study conducted in our Laboratory showed that a combination of parent and teacher help was more effective than that of the teacher alone.

Another option to post words is in a dramatic play activity such as grocery store. A reversible open/closed sign might be at the grocery entrance. Food sections might be labeled vegetables, fruit meat, cereal and dairy products. The children would be encouraged to use these words during play such as turning the sign when the store

opened or closed and sorting groceries into the proberly labeled bins. Considerable teacher help is needed to help the children learn the words through using them. For example, the teacher might say, "I'm looking for fruit. Where do I find it?" Or the teacher might be the delivery person with an order for the children to restock the labeled shelves. To reinforce the learning of the same words used in the grocery store, a related activity might be offered in another part of the preschool; at a quiet table children might sort labels from canned goods into the two categories of fruits and vegetables. Sorting could also occur as to initial consonant sounds.

Reading Corner

It would be difficult to find a preschool that did not have a reading corner with an interesting selection of easily accessible picture books. For teachers know, and research has shown that young children who have contact with books are those who later learn to read more easily in the public schools (Schickedanz, 1978). But in a preschool setting how does one promote a child's dropping in the reading corner and looking at books?

Research (Rawson & Goetz, 1981) conducted in our Laboratory examined ecological and human factors that might increase a child's contact with books. The results showed that adding a teacher to model reading in a small enclosed, rather than an open large, reading corner noticably increased the mean number of minutes the group of children spent in the area per experimental session (from 16 to 64 min), and

the mean number of minutes of overall reading-related behavior in the area (12 to 71 min.) was maintained during the fading of teacher reading in conjunction with teacher prompts and attention for reading. For insance, the teacher might say, "We have a new book in the library corner today." or "Since the block area is crowded, why don't you read a book for awhile." or "You"re reading by yourself, wonderful!"

Furthermore, independent reading-related behavior actually increased markedly, when the teacher read on an intermittent, rather than continuous, schedule. It seems that once children had become familiar with the story lines of the pool of books through teacher reading, it was feasible for them to "read" by themselves, which they found intrinsically reinforcing.

Another value of the teacher spending some time in the reading corner is that it seems to imply to the children that the area is valued. Supporting this notion, when the teacher stopped coming into the area altogether, the children seldom entered the reading corner.

In summary, then, it was found that just an interesting selection of easily available books was inadequate to increase book use, but that a small enclosed reading corner with a teacher reading to the children on an intermittent basis was successful in increasing markedly book usage for these young children.

Organic Reading Center

A more direct approach to facilitate emergent reading in the preschool is an organic reading center. The term organic means natural and was first used in the term organic reading by Sylvia Ashton Warner (1963) in her book Teacher. Organic words are those a child naturally uses to function and communicate in the everyday world. Of necessity then, each child's organic words are individualized to that child. The organic reading center has many of the informal characteristics detailed earlier. This center is an option during free play, and participation in it is voluntary. Sociability and creativity abound. The children visit with the teacher and their peers in the center, sometimes reading their individualized books to each other. The books themselves with the dictation and drawings are the epitomy of creativity.

The organic reading center consists of a primary typewriter (large print), index cards, blank paperback books, crayons and paste, all at a child-sized table with chairs. Books with varying number of pages are available, and the teacher guides the beginner to take a short book and a more experienced child, a longer book.

The basic procedure in the organic reading center is for a child to select a blank book from a bin and then turn to the first page. Next, the child may either dictate a "story" (possibly only a sentence or two) or draw a picture which is followed by a related story. The teacher types the story on the index cards spelling words or merely saying the words and sometimes emphasizing a phonic sound. The child

and teacher read the story together. The child pastes the cards in the book which sometimes contains the related picture. The child takes the completed book home.

The protocol might go like this. Suzy draws a picture of a person, her mommy, and she wants to tell a story about it. Suzy says, "This is my mommy." The teacher replies, "This is my mommy, you want me to type that. Okay." This (teacher says t h i s as she types this) my (teacher says my as she types my) mommy (teacher asks, "What letter does mommy start with?" before she types it). When the sentence is completed, the teacher says, "Let's read it now." They read it together. The teacher comments, "My and mommy both start with m. Hear how they sound alike." Finally, the teacher calls attention to the period at the end of the sentence and says, "This dot tells us to stop."

The children's dictation in the organic reading center exposes them to graphics about which they must learn a great deal before they are ready to master a sight vocabulary and learn to read. Dictation helps children learn that words spoken may be written down with discriminable letters and read. Experience with the written language, letters, words and sentences is necessary on an extended basis before actual letter and word identification can occur. The abstract meaning of letter, word and sentence is a feature system derived from all letters, many words and sentences, and thus it is quite undeductable from a single exemplar.

Overtime at the organic reading center children become skilled in dictating to the teacher. It is at this time that children are more apt to remember and read their words from day to day. Research (Littlejohn & Goetz, 1982) conducted on the organic reading center for the duration of a school year found that the participants in the center made significant gains in rudimentary reading skills compared to matched controls.

A variation that might be included in the organic reading center is one of children dictating messages that they would like to take home that day to parents, siblings, or friends (e.g., Dad, I want to go the the library tonight.) This variation stresses the social usefulness of writing and reading, one of the most important considerations in helping reading to emerge. Finally, the organic reading center might be assessible for any child who wants a sign made for any preschool activity (e.g., Cheerios for Sale 5¢; Please be quiet, I'm Reading.)

A writing table is a good adjunct to the organic reading center. Overtime this center would offer a wide variety of materials condusive to writing--writing instruments, paper, envelopes, blank books, magic slates, small chalk boards, small tablets and sand trays.

Large Group

Large group, when all the children sit on the floor and participate in a group activity, is scheduled in most preschool

settings. This is a time to develop esprit de corps which is useful in handling the overall classroom responsibilities and one of the human joys of life. Emergent reading can be promoted in large group by the many varied activities commonly conducted at this time such as songs, finger plays, discussions and stories, all of which lay a language base for reading. The more direct reading skill of phonic sounds may be taught in large group too, still with the informal flavor used in the other activities mentioned.

A pilot study conducted in our Laboratory found that some children will learn phonic sounds in large group through the playful approach of learning chants which emphasize a particular sound. The chants used were adapted from Picnic of Sounds (Buckley & Cullum, 1975). Basically, the chants were shortened to accommodate a preschool child's memory and attention span, and simple movements to the words were added for the fun of being dramatic.

After trying variations to learn phonic sounds via the chants the following procedure would seem to be most promising. Initially the children learn the chant through modelling and imitation. Then, the chant is printed on a large chart tablet and read together in large group. The teacher mentions that many words in the chant begin with a particular sound. The children then help the teacher find the words that begin with this sound. To reinforce this learning of the phonic sound emphasized in the chant a copy of the chant could be sent home to parents and another one kept in the library corner in the chant

book. And, the organic reading teacher could stress the phonic sounds of the chants. Finally, the children would be encouraged to say the chant on the playground outside and during waiting time.

For illustration, the chant for the Bb sound was "Belly Button":

Belly button, belly button,
On my tummy wall.
Belly button, belly button,
Like a little ball.
But, it won't bounce,
And it won't bend.
It just follows me like a friend.

The accompanying body movements were to point to the belly button, mime bouncing a ball, bend from the waist and walk in a circle to the right.

Conclusion

Preschool children have developmental characteristics that are not suitable for formal structured learning. Yet, they are continually learning, to one degree or another, in their play. Because of this undeniable child-centered learning situation, the traditional preschool has evolved a format in which play is a child's work. The play activity and its arrangement become important, and informal and/or incidental learning reign. Focusing on emergent reading then

the teacher needs to speculate, and the researcher needs to empirically study these speculations, how the preschool environment may be designed and what informal activities may be offered to facilitate the awareness of print and its use along with beginning reading.

This paper has detailed environmental adaptations for emergent reading, some of which have been researched, and others that have been tested only in pilot studies. None of these activities are startingly new. For years, words have been posted in preschools, reading corners available, books read to children, stories dictated and phonic sounds discussed, all in a variety of ways, usually on a now-and-then basis, and with a touch of informality and the hope of some learning.

But even this informal and/or incidental learning can be systematized for more learning to occur for both eager children as well as those who need extra stimulation. One aspect of this systemization is consistency. For example, it seems most productive for the organic reading center to be a free play option every day throughout the school year, if children are to make marked gains in rudimentary reading skills. It also seems that a new phonic sound or the review of a previously learned phonic sound needs to be presented each week to begin to build a phonetic foundation.

Another aspect of systemization is explicit attention to the physical environment, both ecological and human. For instance, a

small enclosed reading corner is condusive to more children dropping in and spending more time there than a large open reading corner. And, children learn more posted words when both the parent and the teacher specifically call attention to them in a meaningful way. Another example of specific teacher behavior would be the teacher reading stories on an intermittent, rather than a continuous, basis with the result of a substantial increase in independent reading-related behavior in that corner.

Finally, informal and/or incidental learning can be systematized only if some data are collected to demonstrate which variation of a procedure works best. If just posting words in the preschool resulted in a high incidence of learning to read them, parents and teachers would not have to call children's attention to them in a meaningful way. If just an open reading corner without a teacher attracted children to participate, then it would not have been necesary to enclose it and have a teacher read intermittendly. Data collection makes one sensitive to what works best in a given situation, and it need not be taken forever, only long enough to understand what learning takes place. Possible the effective variations presented here would not be the most effective ones in a different setting with different teachers and children. Finally, learning alternatives should continually by tried and subjected to data collection; creative teachers are not satisfied with a set curriculum for a long period.

Systemization of informal and/or incidental learning may require a larger staff than some preschools have. Possibly, there may not be enough persons to assign someone permanently to an organic reading center, to assign someone to read stories intermittently in the reading corner, or to have someone collect data. In this instance, it may be necessary to solicit and train volunteers. Or it may be that the key to systemization is good classroom management with the available staff.

It seems apparent that systemization is the crucial factor for effective, and yet developmentally appropriate, techniques for emergent reading. We do not know to what extent reading would emerge in the traditional preschool environment, if it were systematically tailored to facilitate it. If we are committed to children and the advantages of early reading for them, we will try to find out as well as we know how.

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